**Which Side Are You On? The Story of a Song**

**By George Ella Lyon**

**A Readers’ Theater Script for 8 readers adapted by Kristen Pennycuff Trent, PhD**

**Characters: Pa, Ma, Narrator, Harvey, Hazel, Leonard, Elmer, James**

Narrator: My Pa is a miner.

Hazel: Earns our dinner deep in the mountain blasting and loading coal.

Leonard: Sometimes when he’s worked a low seam, my little sister has to walk on his back to straighten it out.

Elmer: We live in a coal company house

James: On coal company land

Harvey: And Pa gets paid in scrip that’s only good at the company store.

Hazel: He says the company owns us as sure as sunrise.

**All: That’s why we’ve got to have a union.**

Leonard: Pa says that if miners get together and say what they want and refuse to dig coal til they get it (that’s called a strike),

Elmer: Our lives will get better.

**All: They ain’t better yet.**

Narrator: We are all of us- me, Harvey, Hazel, Leonard, Elmer, James, and the baby- hiding under the bed. Ma watches from behind the door.

James: Not hiding from a storm

Harvey: Or a bear that’s got into this holler.

Hazel: Not from a thief.

**All: From bullets.**

Leonard: They zing through the wall,

Elmer: Through windows.

**All Except Pa: They ain’t meant for us.**

Ma: They’re meant for Pa.

James: But if a bullet hits you, it don’t matter whose name is on it.

Narrator: Pa ain’t even here.

Harvey: Ma heard that Sherriff Blair was sending gun thugs after Pa.

Elmer: She got word to him not to come home, and he lit out over the mountain.

Hazel: We’re in bad shape now, but if Pa got killed we’d be sunk.

Leonard: So he’s gone to save himself and the union. That’s what this is all about.

James: Ma says we have to be brave. Pa is counting on it.

Narrator: She creeps into the kitchen. Keeping her head down, she reaches up and lifts the calendar off the wall.

Harvey: What are you doing?

Ma: I’m aiming to write something.

**All: TZING! A bullet just missed her wrist.**

Ma: Any of you young’uns got a pencil?

Hazel: We squirm around looking but come up empty-handed. Ma finds a stub in her apron pocket.

Leonard: She uses the door like a table to write on.

Elmer: We can’t move much under the bed and it’s hotter than a chicken coop.

James: The baby starts to whimper too, but that don’t stop Ma.

Ma: “We need a song,”

Narrator: she says.

Harvey: Looks to me like we need a fort

Hazezl: Or a trip around the world,

Leonard: But that ain’t happening.

James: Ma just hums and scribbles on the back of May. When she stops for a minute, Elmer says

Elmer: “Sing it to us, Ma”.

**All: Come all you poor workers. Good news to you I’ll tell of how the good old Union has come in here to dwell. Which side are you on? Which side are you on?**

Narrator: I ain’t on any side! I’m under the bed and I want Pa!

Ma: HUSH! Your Pa’s working for the union. And the union’s what can save us.

Harvey: Looks to me like it’s about to get us killed.

Ma: They’re the company’s bullets.

Hazel: Why don’t the sheriff stop them?

Ma: The company pays him not to. They own Sheriff Blair as sure as they own this house.

**All: They say in Harlan County there is no neutral there. You’ll either be a union man or a thug for J.H. Blair. Which side are you on? Which side are you on?**

Leonard: If Pa gave up the union and did what the bosses say, would they stop shooting at us?

Ma: (Sigh). They would for now.

Elmer: And could Pa go back to work?

Ma: Who wants to work for somebody that’s been shooting at him? And if he did, he’d be a scab.

**All: Scab is a dirty word around here.**

James: It means you cross the picket line and dig coal when the miners are on strike.

Narrator: You help the bosses and hurt the workers.

**All: Pa would never do that.**

Ma: This ain’t easy, but sometimes you’ve got to take a stand.

Harvey: I don’t see us standing. I see us under the bed.

Hazel: Ma ignores this and goes back to writing.

**All: Don’t scab for the bosses. Don’t listen to their lies. Poor folks ain’t got a chance unless we organize! Which side are you on? Which side are you on?**

Leonard: This is how the night goes:

Elmer: Bullets through the walls,

James: Talk under the bed,

Ma: Words on the page.

Narrator: When the thugs finally quit shooting and we crawl out of hiding,

Harvey: we’re sore and hungry, and our house is busted up,

Hazel: but Ma has written us a song.

Leonard: When Pa comes back, he hugs us all, then gets shaking mad.

Pa: They could have killed every one of you!

Ma: You too, but they didn’t. And while they were trying, I wrote something.

Elmer: She sings her song and Pa listens hard.

James: Then he takes a deep breath.

Pa: We can use that. It’ll bring folks together.

**All: Which side are you on? Which side are you on?**

Ma: It did. And it still does.

Narrator: That song, written in 1931 in the mountains of Kentucky in a rain of bullets, has been sung by people all over the world. And Ma, Florence Reece, lived to tell the tale.